

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
ARIZONA
SAFFORD FIELD OFFICE**

EA #: DOI-BLM-AZ-G010-2014-0011-EA

Project Name: New 10-Year Permit to Graham County Highway Department for Sand & Gravel Pit at East End of Swift Trail Road

Lease/Serial/Case File No.: Case File No. AZA 36559

Applicant/Contact Person: Lee Hurston, Deputy Director, Graham County Highway Dept.

BLM Contact Person: Larry Thrasher, Geologist, Safford FO

Legal Description and Map Name: An isolated 20-acre tract of public land comprising the E/2/NE/NE of Section 21-Township 8 South - Range 26 East (G&SRM). The site is about seven miles south of Safford, on south side of Swift Trail Road about two miles east of its intersection with Rte. 191. Swift Trail Road is a good quality from Rte. 191, with the first half paved, providing good access to the site. The site is on the USGS 7.5' Artesia quad map. See Figure 1, Locality Map.

I. INTRODUCTION

Background and Purpose for the Proposal: The purpose of this proposal is to replace our existing 10-year free-use permit with the county, soon to expire, with a new 10-year permit. This site has been in operation since 1984, when the Safford BLM first issued a 10-year permit to the county for this entire 20-acre parcel. The actual pit currently covers most of the northern half of the parcel and extends into the southern half, making it too large to be covered under a Categorical Exclusion (CX). CX's for sand and gravel disposal can no longer be for sites greater than 5 acres in size (516 DM 6, app. 5.4F10). However, a CX was done originally for the site in 1984, when that was permissible, and with only a DNA done for the site since. In consultation with the State Office, we decided that an EA would be more appropriate for this NEPA review, even though environmental clearances including for wildlife and cultural resources have been done in the past.

The Need for the Proposal: According to the application, the material is used for the maintenance and construction of county roads in the area south of Safford, such as the Stockton and Artesia road systems. This site apparently meets their criteria for road use, plus is in a strategic location for local roadwork.

Conformance with Land Use Plan: The proposed action is subject to the Safford Resource Management Plan (RMP), approved September, 1992. This proposed action has been reviewed to determine if it conforms to the land use plan terms and conditions as required by 43 CFR 1610.5, BLM MS 1617.3.

The RMP notes the BLM fosters and encourages mining, lists areas and habitat where the disposal of salable mineral materials such as sand and gravel shall be prohibited, and does not list this area or habitat as a place to be prohibited. The RMP is the current LUP to be relied on; prohibited areas are listed on page 9 of the Record of Decision, dated September, 1992.

Relationship to Statutes, Regulations or Other Plans or Policies: The Graham County Highway Department submitted their application for continued use of this site under the 43 CFR 3600 regulations at Subpart 3604 – Free Use of Mineral Materials.

II. THE PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Description of the Proposed Action: Graham County would continue to occasionally extract sand and gravel from this site for the next 10 years. Extraction is usually done during and immediately after the summer monsoon season, when roads are most likely to wash out and need repair. Equipment on site during excavation is typically a front end loader and one or two 10-ton haul trucks, and if necessary a tracked bulldozer. There may be a sifting screen on site, and stockpiles about 5 to 10 feet high would occasionally be developed. No equipment is left onsite when site is idle. Figure 2 shows some recent photographs of how the site usually looks, with some stockpiles by the working face. Other than sorting the material by size, no processing of the material will be done on site, such as for making asphalt or concrete. The site will continue to be kept safe, trash free, with no highwalls left in the excavations. Final reclamation consists of returning the site to original contours as much as reasonably possible with no slopes steeper than a 3:1 horizontal to vertical ratio; scarifying compressed soils with ripper teeth; recontouring and feathering as needed to blend in with surrounding countryside; and reseeded as needed with a seed mixture approved by the BLM.

The original application called for extracting up to 150,000 cubic yards (about 225,000 tons) and that is what the original permit was for. But the county found they really only use about 10,000 to 15,000 yards over 10 years, so starting in 2004 the permit was reduced to the 25,000 yards used here.

No Action Alternative: Under this alternative, the permit would not be issued. This gravel pit would need to be immediately fully reclaimed by the county, and require the county to find another source of suitable material, or purchase material from privately owned sources, increasing highway maintenance costs. This would also result in a readily available suitable source of materials not being utilized, even though past environmental clearances for the site have resulted in no concerns.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis: None

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES:

Determine Scope of the Assessment: The Safford BLM performed environmental clearances, including for cultural, wildlife, recreational, realty, and rangeland resources, in support of the Categorical Exclusion done in response to the application received from the county in 1984 (#CE-4-113). An update of these past surveys was conducted by the Safford Field Office in support of the DNA prepared in 2004 (#AZ-040-2004-0065).

Issues Identified

Resources Addressed: The past clearances found there were no known species of threatened or endangered plants or animals in the proposed area, and no human dwellings in the area. A cultural clearance and a Visual Contrast Rating Sheet were completed with no concerns noted; no cultural resources were found, and the pit is well tucked from view near the end of a poorly used, dead-end road. And a history now of 30 years of sporadic mining at the site has created no significant new issues.

No impacts are expected to impinge on flood plains, prime or unique farmland values, or on special management areas such as wilderness and ACEC's. No recommendations for mitigating or enhancing measures of residual impacts were found to be necessary. Stipulations are adequate to protect the environment from undue or unnecessary degradation. BLM policy is to make mineral materials available to local governments subject to site selection criteria.

The only issue that has come up through the past 30 years has been occasional minor trespassing on the site, using the working faces for riding ATV's or as backdrop for target shooting, and minor trash dumping. The county has always been responsive to our concerns, tearing down ATV trails and targets, and removing trash to the local landfill.

Cumulative Impacts of the Proposed Action: This action would result in the continued operation and possible expansion of this gravel pit, totaling up to 20 acres of disturbance, although with concurrent reclamation as areas are mined out. The continued use of this 30-year-old gravel pit is not expected to make any kind of appreciable cumulative impact in this area of the San Simon valley south of Safford. The site is fully reclaimable and can be returned to multiple use without any pits or other permanent marks left on the land. This makes the cumulative effects negligible, so long as the reclamation is carried out. Although reclamation bonds can be required for such free-use permits (as per regulations at 43 CFR 3604.25) we generally do not require them of county government agencies, partly due to the permanent nature of their existence.

Cumulative Impacts of the No Action Alternative: There would be no increase to the current environmental impacts caused by mining this mineral material when considering past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions.

Persons/Agencies Consulted:

Tim Goodman, Wildlife Biologist
Dan McGrew, Archaeologist
David Arthun, Rangeland Management Specialist
Todd Murdock, Outdoor Recreation Specialist
Lee Hurston, for Applicant

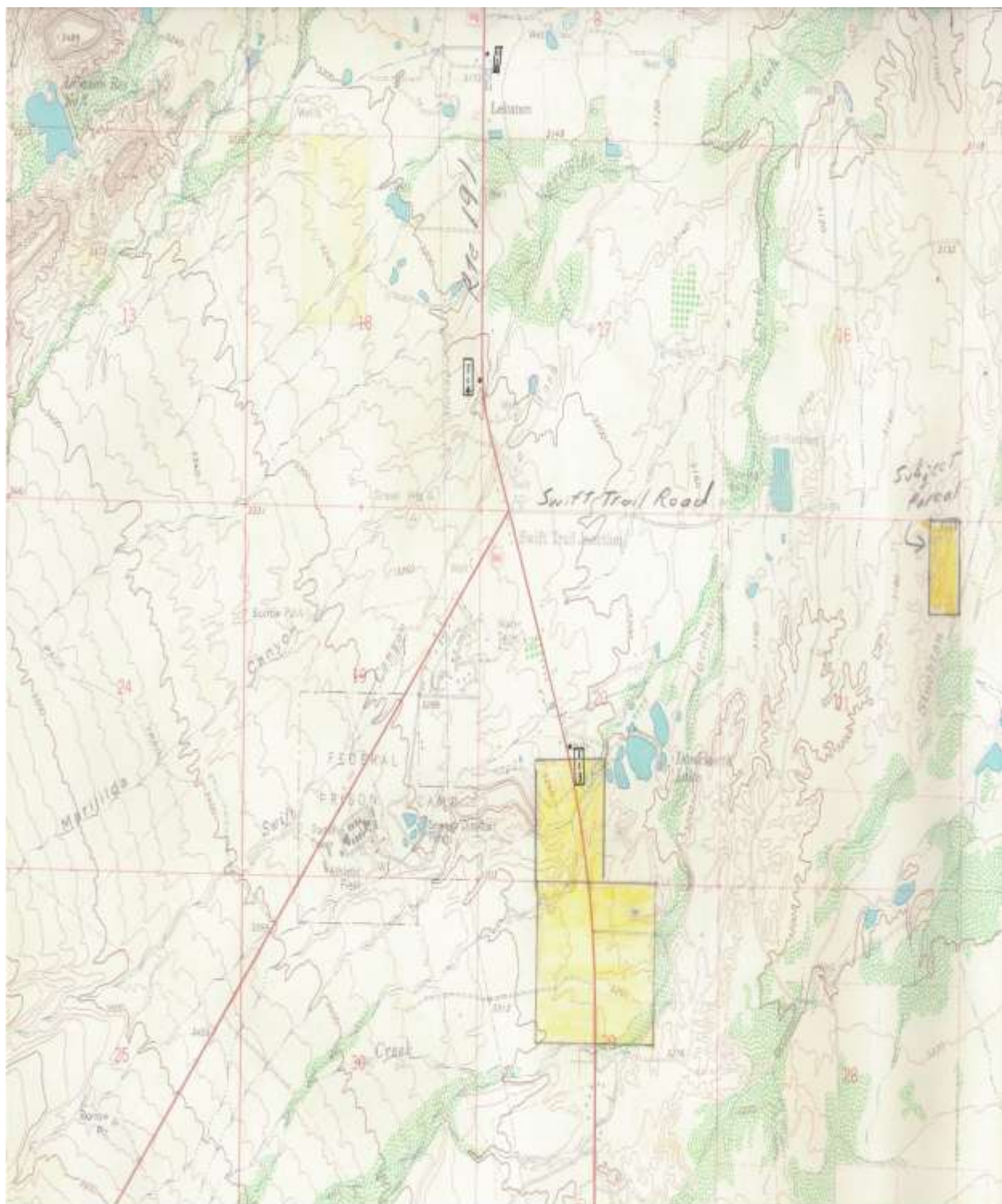
Preparer: Larry Thrasher, Geologist

Date: July 14, 2014

Attachments:

1. Locality Map
2. Ground Photographs of Site
3. GoogleEarth Arial Photograph of Site

Attachments are located in case file AZA 36559



Locality map. From USGS 7.5' Artesia topographic map.



Figure 2. Photographs of site, taken September 26, 2013, showing working face on west, south, and east sides of pit.



Graham Co. FUP site ~~located~~ off Swift Trail Road.

photo taken
11/2011

Yellow is BLM land, blue is state, and uncolored is private

Figure 3. GoogleEarth aerial photograph of site, with pit area outlined.